

Political Brand: role of social agents as a promotional tool for the development of political interest

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Abstract

Recent studies in many democratic countries like USA, Europe and Canada have confirmed that political participation of the electorates is declining over time. The trend is mainly attributed to the youth disengagement due to lack of interest in politics. This matter has become a serious concern for scholars and politicians, while they try to find new ways to develop youth interest in politics. In fact, studying political-interest is not a simple subject because it is directly linked to the behavior of voters.' To ameliorate this behavior, it requires great efforts to position political brand in an attractive way to appeal the young voters. Furthermore, the behavior of young voters is directly influenced by their social networks.

Brand awareness and brand association (in this case political party or politician) dependent on the intensity and amplitude of information and the nature and manner of available tools used for promotional purposes. Particularly in politics, politicians have to select more reliable and strong socially acceptable marketing tool to develop their desired image. This research tends to analyze the role of social agents as a promotional tool in the development of political interest among young voters. Specifically, this paper investigates three core questions. First, who is the most influential and reliable social agent to develop brand awareness and association? Secondly, how social agents, media, and internet can play their role as promotional tools in political interest development? Thirdly, how the branding strategies could be applied to ameliorate the political interest in youth?

Data has been collected from the young students of University of Gujrat, Pakistan to analyze the young voters' behavior and the mediating role of social networks, as promotional tools, in the development of political interest. Analysis of the available data indicates that politicians or political parties, who are actively engaging in developing strong relationships with youth by effectively mobilizing the social agents, media, and internet, shall be successful in developing and inducing the political interest among the youth and consequently enhancing voting-turnout.

Keywords: *political interest, young voters, social networks, promotional tools, Pakistan*

Introduction

Youth disengagement in politics is becoming a serious concern these days. Therefore, many scholars have devoted their attentions to understand the reasons behind the decline of youths' interest in politics. In fact, youth participation has very important and major role in a democratic

political system of any country. Recent studies in many democratic countries like USA, Europe and Canada have confirmed that political participation of the electorates is declining over time. The trend is mainly attributed to the youth disengagement due to lack of interest in politics (O'Neill 2001, Pammett and LeDuc 2003, Blais et al. 2004, Miller and Shanks 1996, Franklin 2004, Wattenberg 2007, Clarke et al. 2004, Wass 2007). Consequently, this lack of interest is increasingly developing the tendency of not voting for any political party (Plutzer 2002, Franklin 2004, Franklin et al. 2004). This tendency affects the overall political system of any country and the elected government lacks the true representation of the democratic system. In literature there is no clear consensus has emerged regarding the reasons behind the decline of young voters' participation in politics (Dostie-Goulet, 2009).

These days the young voters are profoundly interconnected through different social networks as ever before. The development of new e-social networks including facebook, You-tube, twitter, weblogs and SMS etc, have played a major role in the development of social connections. The social networks including social agents (parents, friends, teachers etc), e-social networks and media have a very influential contribution in the development of political interest among young voters (Dostie-Goulet, 2009). Therefore, the aforementioned social agents could be utilized as promotional tool to develop and enhance the level of political interest.

This research tends to analyze the role of social agents as a promotional tool in the development of political interest among young voters. Specifically, this paper investigates three core questions. First, who is the most influential and reliable social agent to develop brand awareness and association? Secondly, how social agents, media, and internet can play their role as marketing tools in political interest development? Thirdly, how the branding strategies could be applied to ameliorate the political interest in youth?

The Conceptual Framework

The term political interest has been define in many ways by many authors. According to Deth (2000) the political interest has two types. He argues that first type of the political interest is the "degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity" or "a citizen's attentiveness to politics." Secondly, he conceptualized political interest as "the relative importance of political matters compared with other activities". Further, Zaller (1992) defines the political interest in terms of cognitive engagement as "the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered". Alternatively, Shani (2007) defines the political interest as "the motivation to engage in politics" that is dependent on the individual's interest to learn and participate in the politics. He argues that political interest is the consequence of motivation rather than the attention. Dostie-Goulet (2009) posits these thoughts and defines the political interest as "the extent to which politics is attractive to someone". All these definitions are inter-connected with each other as these are based on curiosity, attentiveness, attention, and motivation. Therefore, it may be difficult to separate them apart. The common goal of these studies is the developing and enhancing the political interest among young voters. Because, their increased interest in politics brings many politically favorable improvements. Contrarily, the politically interested individuals are more politically knowledgeable, more tendency to vote, more enthusiastic to participate in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). They are strongly inquisitive to seek out more political news, have elevated quest of political learning, and participate at higher rates (Prior, 2007). Consequently, they are more amenable to be mobilized, have active engagement in political participation, and have significantly greater impact on the voting turnout (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Finkel 2002). These definitions provide many alternative ways to increase the level of political interest. However, this study focuses on the

political interest in terms of attractiveness for young voters. Because, political attractiveness is the most powerful indicator that draws the voters' interest, attention and curiosity, enhance the awareness, and motivate them to participate in the political activities. Much research efforts have been devoted to understand the reason behind the youth disengagement in the politics but, the one dimension also responsible for this lack of political interest that remains immature and understudied is the political attractiveness. The question arises here, why to focus on political attractiveness for young voters only? This is because the fact that young voters participate in politics less than older people.

The gap between their political participation is increasing from last many decades. It has been noticed that the young voters are increasingly developing the habit of not voting (Plutzer, 2002, Franklin, 2004). Therefore, the overall voting turnout is decreasing and the young voters are responsible for this decline (Wattenberg, 2007, Wass, 2007). There is no clear consensus has developed among the researchers to name the reasons responsible for youths' disengagement in politics. However, many researchers have claimed that the young voters disinterest in politics was responsible for lessening voting turnout (Blais et al, 2004).

Development of political interest, on individual level, in young voters can be categorized into three types of explanation: demographic or attitudinal explanations, political socialization explanations, or social context explanations. According to the first type of explanation the political interest originates from individual demographic or attitudinal characteristics. Three fundamental demographic predictors – gender, age, and education- have a major contribution in the development of political interest (Lane, 1959). It has been noticed that men, on average, are relatively more interested in political activities than women (Burns, 2002). The relationship between age and political interest has been emphasized by many studies specially focusing on the political interest among youth. These studies concluded that the young people are least interested in the politics (Patterson, 2002). These studies also indicate that the education has direct relationship and the educated individuals are more interested in politics. This is because the educated individuals have greater familiarity with political information, awareness and knowledge. Similarly, the educated voters have tendency to participate in political events more effectively and confidently (Deth, 1990).

The second type of explanation indicates that one's political interest is dependent on the transmission through political socialization (Hyman, 1959). The studies in this context assume that political interest in the youth is transmitted through their parents. Perhaps, the parents are the most influential agents of socialization. According to the study of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) the parental political involvement including political discussion and community activity, has positive effect on the political interest level of their children. Parents, who are actively engage in political discussion, pay keen interest to political news, and have active participation in political, are more likely to have politically interested children (Shani, 2007). With the passage of time as the children grow older their interaction with family progressively decreases (Blyth and Traeger, 1988). At this stage the parents' interest in politics has minimal effect on their children's interest. At this stage of adolescence their friends become more important than parents. Their social interaction increases with peers and they are actively engage in discussion with close friends and peers (Berndt, 1982). Therefore, the peers play significant role during adolescence and teenagers place more importance on being accepted by their fellows' opinions (Erikson, 1972).

Besides the role of parents in political socialization, the schools also have important contribution in the development of political interest. The courses plays vital role in the socialization of students in their adolescence. Many studies have reported that civic courses have very weak effect on political attitude and behavior (Greene, 2000; Campbell, 2006). However, Shani (2007) finds that students having positive experience in their social studies classes are more plausible to have high level of political interest. Similarly, Prior (2009) comprehends that cognitive skills and educational achievements may have positive effect on political interest. Another important contributor of socialization is the teacher. Because, few of them are interested in politics or have to teach political related courses. Their discussion in class setting plays a vital role in the development of political interest. The aforementioned evidences suggest that youths' political socialization have major contribution in shaping their political interest.

The third type of explanation suggests that one's political interest originates from one's social context. This explanation is less focused on individual level and tends to view the development of political interest in wider context. The behavior of individuals is deeply dependent on their social upbringing. Because, it's one's social environment that can creates "background knowledge for how to act and how to be". Some social environments prohibit the people to openly talk or exhibit their political interest. They feel inappropriate to express their political views and to involve in political discussion (Eliasoph, 1998). On the other side of spectrum, some social environments motivate their people to incorporate political discussion in their daily lives and they get engaged in political discussion on regular basis (Walsh, 2004). Eveland (2004) argues that people may become more interested in politics to win respect, admiration and politically influential status. Therefore, they have to remain their political knowledge updated and likely to pay more attention to the current events and news. These studies suggest that social environment can influence the peoples' political interest and participation.

Internet is another very important social agent in the development of political interest. Especially, the case of adolescents who are more enthusiastic users of electronic medium like cell phones, SMS messages, Virtual communities, file sharing and other form of e-interaction (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). New electronic social network including You-tube, Face-book, Twitter, Weblogs, and SMS messages has been used in many research campaigns. Recently, there is extensive use of this e-social networking medium through the Obama campaign. The election results explain the fact that by incorporating this medium three million more young voters participated in 2008 election that did in 2004 (Circle, 2008). This engagement of young voters in elections can be explain by three reasons. First, it is obvious that Internet has a huge impact on this age group. Because, majority of the Internet users (82%) belong to the age group from 18 to 29 and only few users (14%) belong to age group 59 and above (Jowell, 2005). Second, the young people are likely to be more influenced by the e-social networks as compared to their older age companions. Third, many political studies highlights the fact about youth disengagement in politics (Putnam, 2000, Skocpol, 2003). The activities on the Internet mobilize the young voters to participate in elections. Therefore, their level of community involvement is rising (Zukin et al., 2006) and their participation in politics is increasing due to internet as otherwise they do not normally attracted to politics (Best & Krueger, 2005). This impact of internet on youth political participation has possibly four reasons. First, there are a lot of available political opportunities on internet for political involvement including online voting in polls, web blogging and many likewise (Strandberg, 2006). Second, the electronic medium provides the minimal cost of participation (Best and Krueger, 2005). There are no additional charges to participate in political activities. Some authors suggest that this medium is more open as it provides equality of opportunities for political engagement (Bimber, 2003). Third,

it is suggested that the internet is a very quick and up-to-date medium (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Furthermore, it provides all necessary and intensive information for political discussion (Hale et al., 1999). Finally, the internet social networking can endorse the working of democracy and can improve the relationship among citizens, politicians and political parties (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006). The media, as another social agent, also plays a very important role in youth political participation. Because, the young voters are more media savvy and they are more likely to be effected by the media (Nava, 1992). Advances in media especially the talk shows provide more opportunities for politicians to interact with voters and convey their views (Kuhn, 2004).

In summary, all agents of political socialization discussed above play a crucial role in the socialization process and the development of political interest among youth. However, it is quite difficult to establish their influence on the youth political engagement. Furthermore, few of them have greater importance as compared to others and as said earlier, their influence varies according to the growth of the voters and their social interaction. This study tends to understand the influence of these social agents on the young voters and to point out the most effective medium that could be used as a promotional tool to enhance the political interest.

Grounded on the above political socialization theories, a conceptual framework is proposed that unfold the dynamics working behind in creating political interest among youth population in figure-1

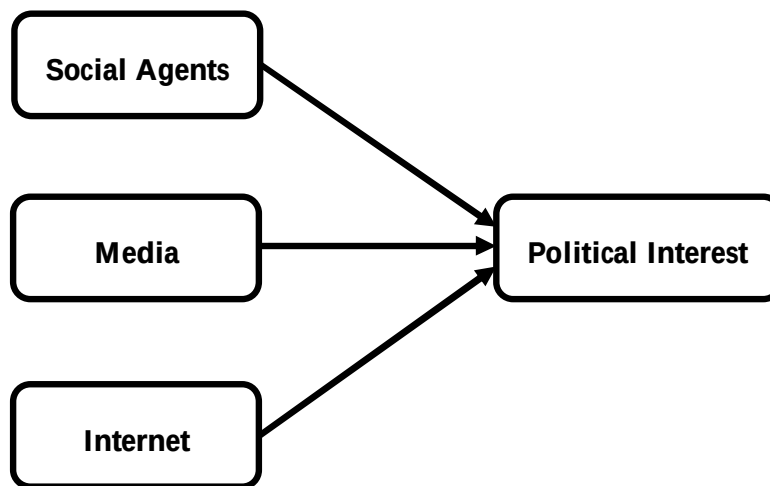


Figure-1 Conceptual framework unfolding the development of Political Interest in youth population

In the above model the six participants considered as social agents are Parents, Relatives, Friends, Religious Leaders and politicians. Media consists of eight variables including news, news paper, talk shows, radio, movies, political shows, reports and speeches. Similarly, Internet includes five variables including You-tube, Facebook, Twitter, Weblogs and SMS.

Data and Methodology

The survey of the research was conducted at the school of business, University of Gujrat. Because, the University is located in the city that is regarded as political hub city and has very crucial role in the Pakistani politics. The sample of students was identified by using the stratified random sampling technique using the proportional allocation. Ten male students and ten female students were randomly selected from each semester of the BBA and MBA Students (BBA semester 2, 4, 6

& 8; MBA Semester 2 & 4). The total sample size was 110 students. A questionnaire was developed involving all the relevant social agents that contributes toward the development of youths' political interest. The response rate of the respondents was 98% approximately. Likert type scale was used to rank the questions into ten equal parts. On this scale 1 represents the weakest contribution of the social agents in the development of political interest and 10 represents the strongest contribution of the social agents. The students have to rank the contribution level of the social agents in the development of their political interest. The collected data was analyzed by using the SPSS, UCINET and NetDraw. Following table represents the descriptive statistics of the data. Total number of male respondents was 56 and the total number of female respondents was 52. The average age of all participants is 21 years.

Table 1 : Analysis of the data

		Female		Male		Combined		Combined		
		Mean	Std D	Mean	Std D	Mean	Std D	t-test	99% Conf. Interval	
									Lower	Upper
Social Agents	Parents	5.02	3.534	4.07	3.244	4.52	3.402	13.930	3.67	5.37
	Relatives	3.77	2.548	4.55	3.004	4.18	2.813	15.593	3.48	4.88
	Teachers	5.75	2.757	4.71	3.061	5.20	2.955	18.458	4.46	5.94
	Friends	4.94	3.077	5.43	2.872	5.20	2.967	18.381	4.46	5.94
	R. Group	4.77	3.246	4.16	2.895	4.45	3.067	15.203	3.68	5.21
	Politicians	5.81	3.689	6.45	3.294	6.15	3.485	18.496	5.27	7.02
Media	News	7.62	2.871	7.72	2.996	7.67	2.924	27.517	6.94	8.40
	News Paper	7.42	2.852	6.90	3.149	7.15	3.010	24.896	6.39	7.90
	Talk Shows	7.58	2.689	7.67	2.922	7.63	2.802	28.550	6.93	8.33
	Radio	4.33	3.400	4.00	3.101	4.15	3.235	13.471	3.35	4.96
	Movies	4.37	3.332	5.59	2.884	5.01	3.149	16.682	4.22	5.80
	Political Shows	6.25	3.586	6.90	3.226	6.59	3.401	20.327	5.74	7.44
	Reports	5.08	3.283	5.03	3.173	5.05	3.211	16.511	4.25	5.86
	Speeches	5.37	3.218	6.31	2.981	5.86	3.117	19.730	5.08	6.64
Internet	You Tube	4.12	3.347	4.71	3.499	4.43	3.425	13.556	3.57	5.28
	Face-book	5.15	3.594	4.97	3.335	5.05	3.445	15.388	4.19	5.92
	Twitter	3.13	2.737	3.00	2.589	3.06	2.648	12.132	2.40	3.73
	Weblogs	3.69	2.981	2.88	2.363	3.26	2.691	12.720	2.59	3.94
	SMS Messages	6.00	3.531	6.50	3.294	6.26	3.402	19.312	5.41	7.11

The table-1 was arranged in the matrix form using the contribution level of all variables at the likert scale. Although table-1 reveals that all agents contributes in the development of political interest among young voters but the aim of this study is to investigate the most important contributors so that they could be focused more as promotional tools to increase the political interest. This data were then copied to the spread sheet of the UCINET and visible network diagrams were the output of NetDraw using the spread sheet of the UCINET. The NetDraw diagrams at contribution strength level 1, 2, 3, and 4 are unable to generate understandable conclusions because of their complexity.

Therefore, the mean of all socio-agents was tabulated in matrix form to increase the understanding level of the NetDraw's output. Finally, based on this matrix the NetDraw analysis was performed on the strength level 5, 6, and 7. It was noticed that all the nineteen variables contributes in the development of the political interest but they varies according to their level and the significance. Their level of contribution varies according to the strength of the scale used in this study that consists of 1 as the weakest contributor and 10 as the strongest contributor in the development of political interest. The purpose of this analysis is to point out those agents that have very less contribution in the development of political interest. Likewise, the agents that contribute most are spot out for this study. Subsequently, the most influential variables highlighted in this study will be used as the important promotional tool for the development of the political interest. In this way the energy and efforts invested to develop political interest will be more focused, efficient and result oriented. Following diagrams are based on the contribution level of 5, 6 and 7 of all the variables on the gender of the participants.

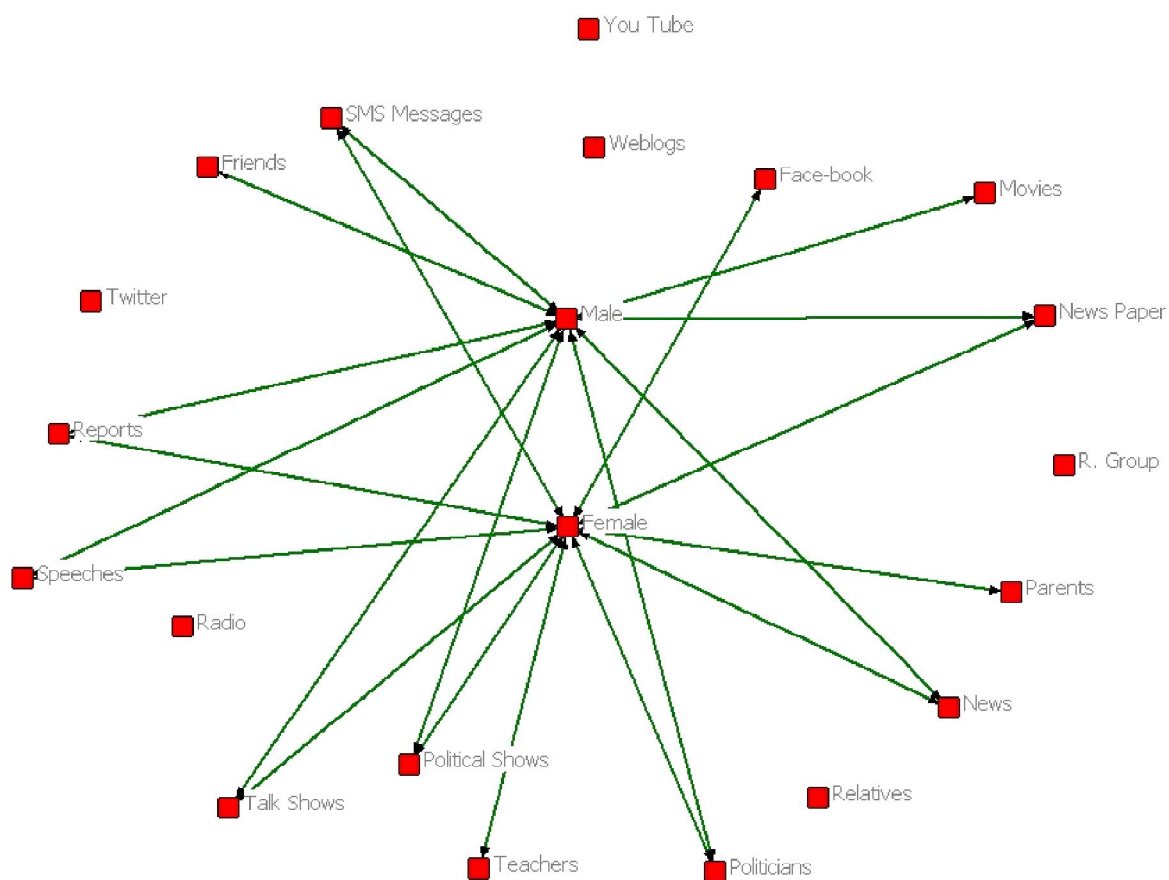


Figure 2
Source: Socio-gram Analysis using UCINET and NetDraw at Link-strength level 5

In figure 2 it is noticed that few agents including Weblogs, Religious groups, Relatives, Radio, Twitter and Weblogs do not have any contribution in developing political interest in both male and female at strength level 5. It can also be observed that few agents including face-book, Parents and Teachers only play a role in developing political interest among female. These agents do not have any contribution in the development of political interest among male participants. Similarly, few agents including Movies and Friends contribute in developing political interest among male only. Other agents including Newspaper, News, politicians, Political Shows, Talk shows, Speeches,

Reports and SMS messages have contribution in the development of political interest among both male and female.

The analysis of figure 3 at the strength level 6 represents that many agents including Religious Groups, Parents, Relatives, Radio, Reports, Friends, Twitter, You-tube, Weblogs, Face-book, and Movies do not have any contribution in the development of political interest among both male and female. Few agents including Speeches, Politicians and Speeches have contribution in developing political interest among male only. There is not a single agent that plays role in the development of political interest among female.

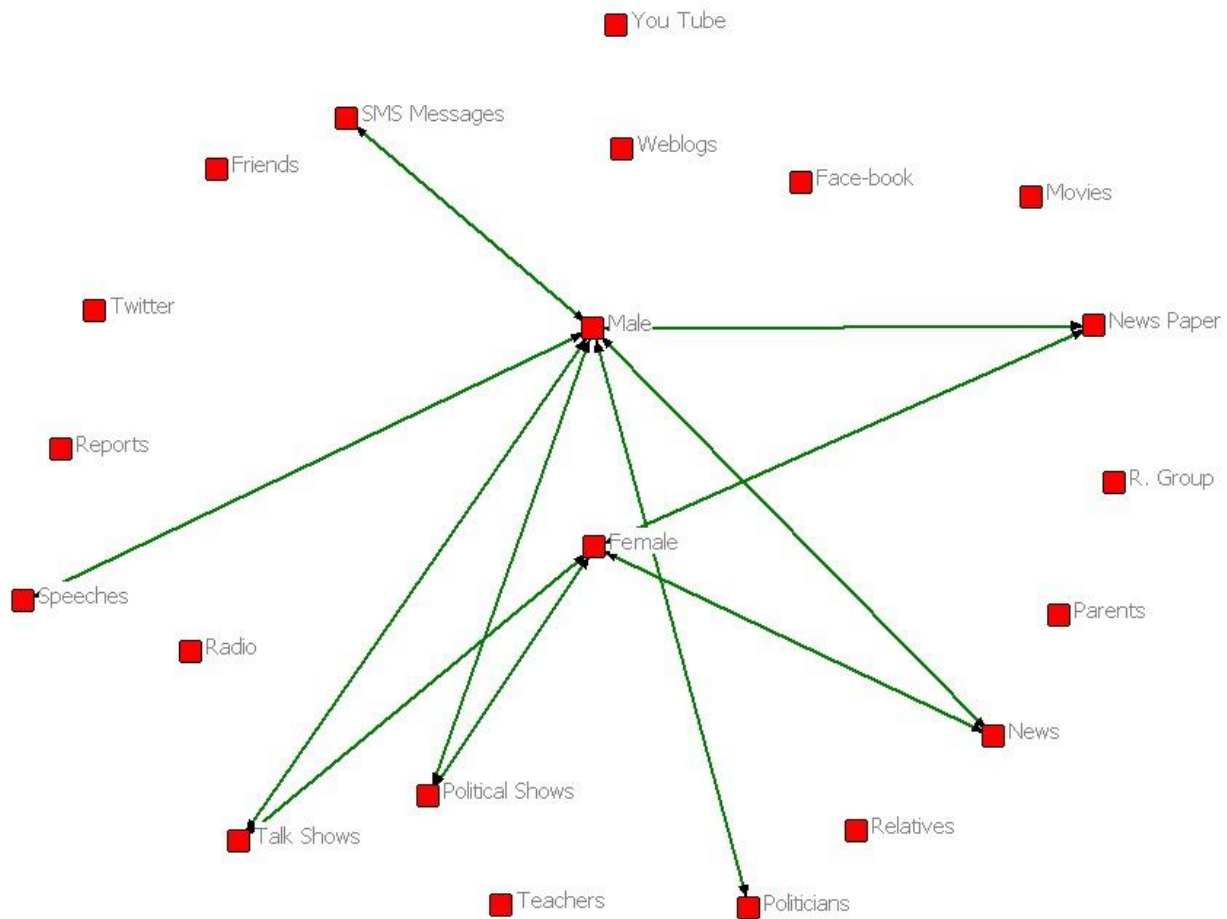


Figure 3
Source: Socio-gram Analysis using UCINET and NetDraw at Link-strength level 6

The agents including News, Newspaper, Political Shows, and Talk Shows have contribution in the development of political interest among both male and female at the strength level 6.

The analysis of the figure 3 at the strength level 7 represents that majority of the variables (fifteen out of nineteen) including Religious Groups, Parents, Relatives, Politicians, Political Shows, Radio, Speeches, Reports, Friends, Twitter, SMS Messages, You-tube, Weblogs, Face-book, and Movies do not play any role in the development of political interest. However, a single social agent the Newspapers contribute in the development of political interest among females only. There is not a single social agent highlighted in the study that contributes in developing political interest among

male participants. There are only two social agents News and Talk Shows have contributed in the development of political interest among both male and female at the strength level 7.

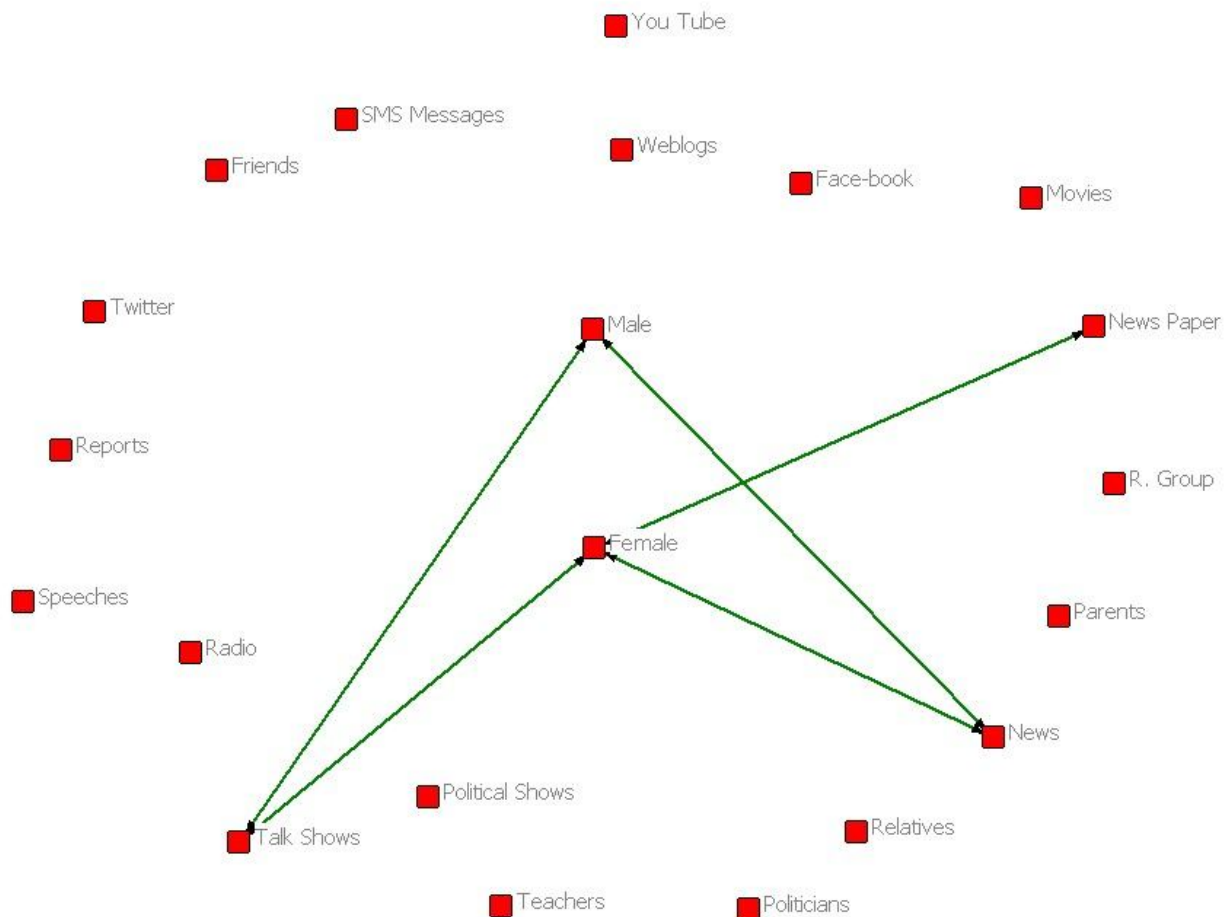


Figure 4
Source: Socio-gram Analysis using UCINET and NetDraw at Link-strength level 7

These socio-grams demonstrate the role of social agents in developing the political interest among male and female. Furthermore, to test the role of these social agents on the basis of geographical area (i.e Rural and Urban) and income level the following tests were conducted;

The significance value of Shapiro-Wilk test demonstrates that social agent and media variables follow the normal distribution, while internet variable does not follow the normal distribution.

Table 2: Tests of Normality

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Social Agent	.989	110	.554
Media	.980	110	.092
Internet	.962	110	.003

Table 3: Independent Samples Test

	t-test for Equality of Means
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As the social agent and media variables are normally distributed, therefore a parametric t-test is applied to check the equality of means across rural and urban. The significance value of the t-test demonstrates that role of the social agent and media are same across the rural and urban.

	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Social Agent	-.839	108	.403
	-.905	84.536	.368
Media	-1.157	108	.250
	-1.115	63.307	.269

As the internet variable does not follow the normal distribution, therefore a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test is applied to check the equality of the means across rural and urban. The significance value of the Mann-Whitney U test demonstrates that the role of the internet is same across the rural and urban.

Table 4: Test Statistics

	Internet
Mann-Whitney U	1287.000
Wilcoxon W	1953.000
Z	-.287
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.774

Table 5: ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Social Agent	Between Groups	69.912	2	34.956	.293	.747
	Within Groups	12761.579	107	119.267		
	Total	12831.491	109			
Media	Between Groups	1382.387	2	691.194	2.586	.080
	Within Groups	28599.076	107	267.281		
	Total	29981.464	109			

The significance value of the F-test is 0.747 for social agent and 0.080 for media, which are greater than level of significance 0.05. Thus, the average score of social agent and media are equal across income groups.

The significance value of the Kruskal Wallis test is 0.481, which is greater than level of significance 0.05. Thus, the average score of internet is equal across income groups.

Table 6: Test Statistics

	Internet
Chi-Square	1.463
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.481

These results indicate that regardless of geographical area and the income levels of the respondents the role of social agents in developing political interest remain same. This is interesting to notice that respondents from all geographical locations and income levels these social agents have similar contribution in their level of development of political interest.

Conclusion

Presence of political interest among young voters at a minimum level is a fundamental prerequisite for the development and stability of the democratic political societies. However, the level of political interest or political involvement is based on the individual attributes, socialization process

and the social network. Therefore, the social agents vary according to their degree of contribution in the development of the political interest. The results of this study indicate the presence of political interest among the young voters. Moreover, this study clarifies the importance and significance of social network on the development of political interest. In fact, all social agents included in this study are the important contributors of the political interest among young voters. But, few of them including News, Newspaper, Political Shows, and Talk-Shows have influential role in the development of political interest. Therefore, these four social agents could be very useful promotional tools for the development of the political interest and involvement. By focusing on these four social agents as the promotional tool the political parties could possibly increase the level of political interaction, awareness and party associations among the young voters. Another, interesting aspect is that the contribution level of these social agents stands same across different geographical locations and income levels. Therefore, the similar strategies could support in enhancing the political interest. Additionally, increase in the number of news channels in Pakistan has played a very important platform for political discussion that leads to the development of political interest, party image, change in voting preferences, and young voters' attitude towards the politics. Consequently, the political parties that will priorities the young voters in their manifesto will have edge over the competing parties by properly using the social networks as the promotional tools and will have substantial raised political interest, strengthened party image, increased vote turnout and favorable attitude of the young voters.

Limitations of the study

There are few limitations of the study in hand that should be considered. First, the data were cross sectional in nature and do not reflect the variation in the development of political interest over time. Therefore, a longitudinal study is required to understand the variations in developing political interest over time. Second, respondents belong to almost similar age group, education level and disciple of qualification therefore, results of the study in hand limits the representation of diverse population. Third, the data is collected from a single location, which could raise concerns about the affect of community system, areas without proper access of few social agents, and culture that limits the generalizability of the results.

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